

The Violin.

By James Oliver Curwood

JEAN PIERROT'S hand gripped hard at the hilt of the hunting knife in his belt, and for a moment the thin, dark, sensitive face that he turned toward the white glow of the aurora flashing in the northern skies was filled with something that was more than the grief which filled his soul. From the lighted cabin, half hidden in the deep shadows of the thick spruce, came the sound of laughter—a man's laughter, loud, buoyant and filled with a happiness that struck Jean like a dagger; and mingled with it was the sweeter, lower laughter of a girl. With the stealth of the gray-furred lynx which he hunted for the company, Jean crept nearer to the lighted window, and the great, dark eyes which he had inherited from his French mother were filled with a threatening glitter. For the first time since he could remember, Jean felt within his heated blood the desire to kill. The sinews of his hands were tense in their eagerness to choke the life from the man who was laughing within the cabin; the fingers of his right hand were like steel ribs about the caribou-horn grip of his knife. He looked about him with keen, quick-seeing eyes. On all sides the forest shut in the clearing like a black wall. One by one the few lights at the post had gone out, until there remained only those in the company's store and the cabin. The dogs were quiet. He knew by the white glow of the billion stars in the sky and the faintly crackling sound that came to him from the shooting lights over the pole, that it was late. The young Englishman would soon be leaving the cabin, and then—

Silence had fallen in the cabin. It was followed now by a low, sweet voice in song, and, as he listened, the glitter left Jean's eyes and he sank upon his knees in the snow with a broken, sobbing cry. Meleese was singing. She was singing to this Englishman, who had come to destroy his beautiful world for him, the Cree love-song which he had taught to Meleese before her baby lips could scarce lift forth the words. It was *his* song—and *hers*. Together they had sung



Drawings by George F. Kerr

turned into the stunted scrub of the Great Barrens, from beyond which the Esquimaux and their fierce little fighting dogs came now and then. Eastward it struck Hudson's Bay. South and west there was no end to it. It was the forest that Jean remembered first of all in looking back. It had been his play-garden when a little, brown-faced mother watched over him and played with him. Then it became mother, brother, everything to him, and began teaching him in the great code of life, as life is lived a thousand miles north. It was the forest that told him more of God than the missionary who came over from Fort Churchill and made a devout Catholic of him. The whispering winds of summer in the spruce tops, the peaceful sweetness of its vast, silent places, the wailing of arctic blasts over the snow dunes in winter gave to him the strange, wild music which he played upon his old violin. *Le violon*, as Jean called it, had come to him as a heritage from the father he had never seen; and yet deep down in his soul he thanked the forest for that.

too. To him the forest was the source of all things good. The God of the Virgin and the God of his forests were one. If there had been two Gods in his conception of things, he would have worshiped the forest God, for, above all things else, it was the forest that had given him Meleese.

EVEN in his grief he smiled as he thought of Meleese, for the vision he saw in the dying firelight went back to the beginning of things—back to a Christmas Day, many years ago, when he had looked upon a white baby for the first time, and when that baby had kicked and squirmed and made strange noises and stranger signs to him and had clutched its tiny fingers in his black, shining hair. That was the beginning of Jean's love story and the beginning of Jean's deeper worship of the forest. From the hour that Cummins came in from the edge of the Barrens, bringing with him Meleese and her dead mother on the same sledge, life changed for Jean. After that Meleese filled his world. For them there was nothing beyond the forest, the

stars; in that same cabin. And he, Jean Pierrot, had sung it and had played it upon his violin when the mother of Meleese had gone to her rest under the big sentinel spruce in the edge of the clearing, when Meleese was just old enough to toddle along at his side in their hunt for the red-glow and bak-neesh flowers. Now she was singing it to the Englishman. Quietly Jean rose to his feet. He stood up, straight and stalwart in the night, and turned his face to the sky.

"The great God bless you and give you happiness, my Meleese," he breathed, and went slowly to his own cabin beyond the post house, at the other edge of the clearing.

FROM its wooden peg in the wall he took his old violin and sat down in the dull glow of the fire that came from the door of the cabin stove. He tried to play, but there was a curious twitching in his fingers that made them run wild, and he laid the instrument on a stool beside him, where its ruddy sides caught the dancing colors of the firelight. It was one of the few times that the violin had failed him when he took it from the worn peg in the wall. He shuddered and buried his dark face between his hands, staring deep into the dying glow of the fire; and in those moments there flashed before him a vision of his world—an empty, desolate world to him now, while but a short time before it had been very near to his simple dreams of paradise. The forest was this world of Jean Pierrot's. It began a little beyond his cabin door and reached out on all sides farther than he had ever been. Northward it

these three they passed the years until Meleese, at Jean's desire, at went to spend a season at the company's school at Fort Churchill.



"She was like the pictures he had seen of the wonderful creatures who lived in the great cities of which he had heard, hundreds and hundreds of miles away."

the few weeks that she remained at the post. A grief that he was just beginning to understand took him deep into the forest on the day that she returned to Churchill. This time Meleese was gone only five months. She came back more beautiful and more wonderful to him than ever, and brought with her books and music and wonderful clothes which he had only seen in pictures before. This time she did

HE thought of that day brought a stab of pain to Jean's heart. Meleese, in leaving, had given him her red mouth to kiss and had gone with her hair hanging in a big, shining braid down her back. Jean loved this hair. He loved to look upon it in the sunlight, flowing in a cascade of rippling fire over her shoulders; he loved to see the shining braid gleaming and dancing and laughing at him, as they ran their races through the forests and among the rocky ridges. And Meleese had come back from Churchill, nearly a year later, with her hair piled upon the crown of her head in a manner that was strange and terrible to him. She was no longer the little Meleese of his forests, but was like the pictures he had seen of the wonderful creatures who lived in the great cities of which he had heard, hundreds and hundreds of miles away. He had not kissed her when she returned, though he knew that she had turned her face up to him to be kissed. He had not dared to touch her hair or to deck it with flowers during

not offer her lips for him to kiss. But she was happy, happier than Jean had ever seen her in his life. A week later the company's agent from Fort Churchill had come to the post, and with him his son. Ostensibly they had come to hunt caribou. It was then that Jean Pierrot saw why Meleese was happy. It was the young Englishman's voice that he heard now, singing as he went to his quarters in the factor's house.

JEAN slipped to the door and went out. Something which he could not master drew him toward Meleese, and not until he was near her cabin did he realize that under his arm he was carrying the old violin. Her window was still aglow, and suddenly the door opened and Meleese appeared. He started to move quickly away, but the girl saw him and even at the distance that separated them she recognized him.

"Jean!" she called. "Jean, is that you?" He stopped and she came out to him.

"It is you, Jean," she said. "Why don't you answer?" There was a curious tremble in her voice as she caught sight of the violin. "I want to talk to you. I want to tell you something, Jean," she urged. "Will you come in?"

He followed her mutely into the cabin, and when he had seated himself Meleese brought a low stool and sat at his feet as in the old days. Her cheeks were flushed. There was a warm, soft glow in her eyes that frightened him. He knew what she was about to say.

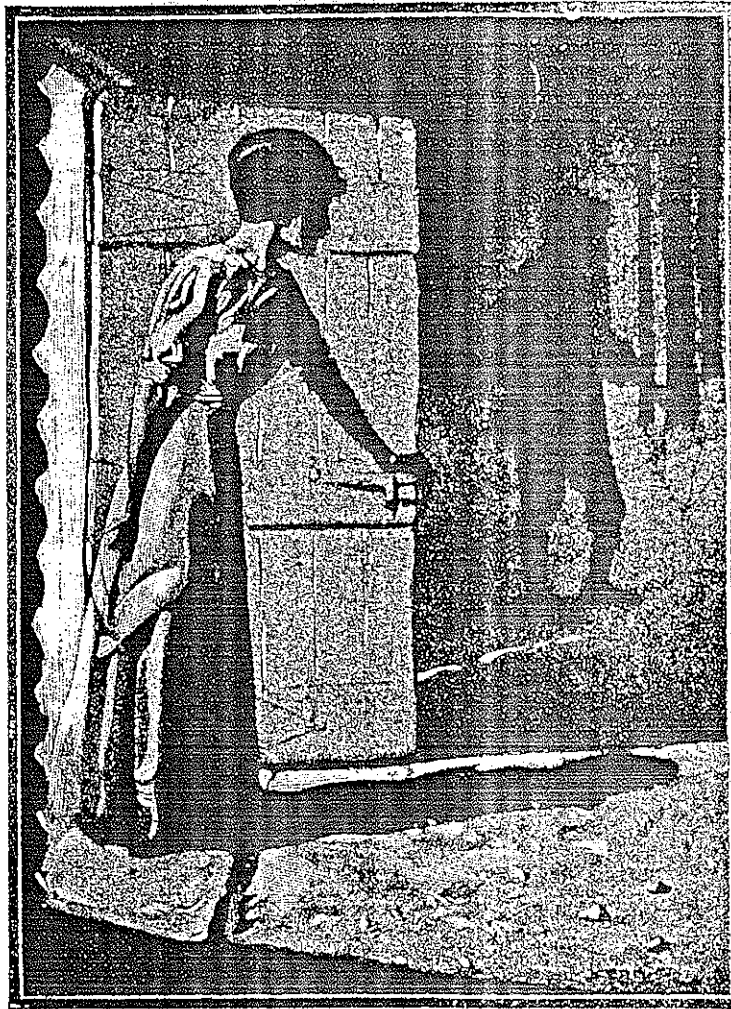
"You are changed, Jean," she whispered, resting her arms on his knees and looking up into his face. "You are not like the old Jean—the Jean who—who used to love me."

"I will always love you, my Meleese," struggled Jean. "Each night I pray the Virgin to give you happiness."

"You want me to be happy, Jean—always?"

"Yes."

Meleese lowered her eyes. There was a low, joyous note in her voice when she spoke.



"Suddenly the door opened and Meleese appeared."

"Day after to-morrow is Christmas, Jean. Very soon after that I am going to be married. I will not be completely happy until then."

Jean was quiet. Not a muscle of his face quivered.

"I wanted to be married on Christmas, Jean," continued Meleese gently. "But—I can't tell you any more. Are you glad, Jean?"

"Yes, I am glad," said Jean, scarcely hearing his own voice. "I am glad—that you are going to be happy."

He rose to his feet and went to the door, a blindness in his eyes, a chill like that of death in his heart. At the door he knew that once more he beheld the face of Meleese, lifted to him as in the old times, pleading, filled with the old love, giving him her lips to kiss. She *knew*. She was sorry for him. He kissed her and said, in his old, brotherly way,

"Good-night, ma belle Meleese. It is time for you to go to bed."

He went out into the deep snows, under the shining stars, deep into the gloom of the spruce forest. And Meleese, after he had gone, picked up the old violin, which he had forgotten, and played and sang the low, sweet music of the Cree love song which he had taught her years and years before.

IT WAS dull, gray day when Jean came back to his cabin. He built a fire and made coffee and bolted his door. He slept until toward noon, when it was time to make coffee again.

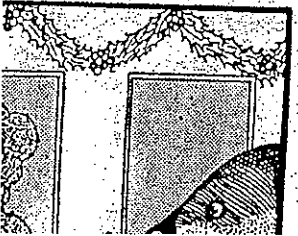
Through his window he watched the deepening of the gloom outside and listened to the wailing sounds that came with the wind from the north. In a little while one of the fierce arctic storms would break over the Barrens, and he wondered if the others at the post had taken warning and come in early. Then he began gathering a few things from about him and placed them on the table. They were

things associated with Meleese, and he sat, silent, looking at them for a long time. There were the three or four picture books which they had worn out, and over which they had dreamed together of the big, wonderful world which they

(Continued on page 27.)

Angels of Snows

back,



The Violin.

(Continued from page 15.)

knew was somewhere beyond their forests; a Bible, frayed and worn, pathetic in its ragged poverty, which Meleese had given to him three birthdays before, and a dozen other trinkets, each bringing back to Jean some sweet memory of the past. From among these Jean chose two things—the Bible and a pair of worn little shoes of caribou skin that Meleese had kicked and crowed in before she could walk. He put them in the pocket of his leather coat and went to the window.

The darkness outside was almost that of night. With the whistling cry of the wind there came now biting clouds of hard, shot-like snow that beat in volleys against the cabin. The factor had lighted his big lamp in the company store. At the far end of the clearing Jean saw a star of light shining faintly in Meleese's window, and he cried out her name softly to himself.

"Meleese, Meleese, my sweet Meleese," he breathed, as gently as though she were listening to him, "I am glad that you are happy. But Jean Pierrot cannot stay to see you marry the Englishman. As soon as the storm is over, I will go."

He pulled out a worn pack-sack from under his bunk and put into it a few necessary articles of food and his blankets. A knock at the door interrupted him. When he opened it, MacDougall, the factor, burst in, his face beaten red by the storm. With a quick, anxious glance he swept the dark room.

"Brant isn't here?" he demanded.

"Brant, the Englishman—no," said Jean.

"He went out this morning—alone—to hunt caribou on the Barrens," con-

Pierrot knew that, and yet with the knowledge of it there entered into him a strange, sweet happiness that robbed the storm of its terror and pain for him. *Le m'sieur*, the Englishman, would die; and he, Jean Pierrot, would die. But he would die for Meleese, which would be a happiness. This was better than running away, as he had planned to do. He would hunt for the Englishman. He would try to find him, for Meleese. But he had no hope, and the very hopelessness of his quest brought him comfort. When the end came he would lie down, with his beloved violin close beside him, and they would pass out together. He stopped to tuck the violin in his pack. The touch of it and the knowledge that it was with him, the mute spirit of it watching over him and guarding him to the end, filled his heart with content. They were the only two left in their world now—he, Jean Pierrot, and the old violin.

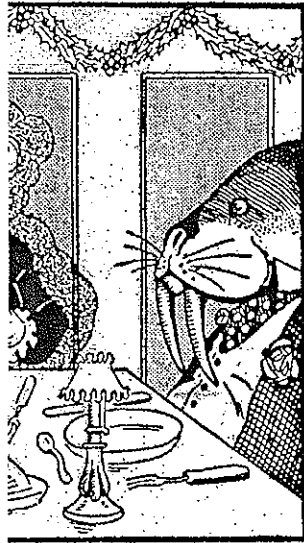
He came to the edge of the Barrens. He struck out boldly, where Brant must have gone first in search of caribou, his head bowed against the storm and his thick fur cap pulled low over his face and ears. He guided himself by the wind. So long as it was in his face he knew that he was traveling north; when he swung westward it was against his right side. At the end of half an hour he stopped, swung his rifle to his shoulder and fired two shots. The slashing wind cut the reports off at the muzzle of his gun and carried them away so quickly that they seemed to die almost instantly. As a matter of duty he stopped at intervals of every ten minutes or so and fired two shots, and stood for a moment listening. At the end of an hour he knew that he could not have retraced his steps to the post. The Barrens had swallowed him.

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"Brant isn't here?" he demanded.

"Brant, the Englishman—no," said Jean.

"He went out this morning—alone—to hunt caribou on the Barrens," continued the factor. "He hasn't come back. If he's caught in this storm—lost——"

Jean looked steadily at him.

"Le m'sieur will die," he said quietly.

A spark of fire leaped through his blood. It warmed him, heated him, filled him for an instant with a strange, tingling sensation of joy, which he fought back and crushed as the factor nodded and stared at him.

"Gawd! yes—he will die," said the factor. "I have sent men out to fire guns, but they won't dare to go a half mile from the post. Look!" he cried, pointing out of the window. "It's blacker than night! Out on the Barrens you wouldn't live two hours in that storm unless you buried yourself under the snow. And he doesn't know enough to do that."

MacDougall opened the door and faced the storm again.

"You can't hear a gun," he called back, "and they're firing every half minute!"

"He will die!" repeated Jean, going again to the window. "Le m'sieur, the Englishman, will die!" The volleys of snow hid the light in Melese's window. "He will die!" he repeated again and again; and he looked through the storm and the blackness, through the thick log walls of Cummins's cabin, and saw the white, terror-stricken face of Melese. "He will die!" He strapped the pack-sack over his shoulders and took down his rifle from the wall, opened the door and struggled against the storm toward the home of Melese. "He will die, he

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He still went north and a little west, *feeling* his way instead of seeing, shouting now and then between his rifle shots the name of Brant, the Englishman. After a time it seemed to him that every time he shouted and each time he fired his gun the wind seemed to howl and shriek at him louder than before, until at last he could scarcely hear his own voice or the sound of his rifle. It did not occur to him at first that the ceaseless, terrific beating of the storm was deafening as well as blinding him, or that his voice was growing weaker instead of the storm growing stronger. Three times during the second hour he dropped down into the dry snow dunes and buried himself for a few minutes at a time. From the beginning of the third hour he did this as frequently as he fired his rifle.

He swung to the southwest. So suddenly that it startled him, there came a lull in the wind. The volleys of snow pellets staggered, dropped like spent shot and fell lifeless about him. And in that moment there came a great, throbbing leap of life into Jean Pierrot's heart. From ahead of him—very near—there came to him faintly a sound that was not of the storm. It was a voice. He heard it twice, three times; and then, far in the arctic darkness behind him, there came a moaning, whistling, rushing sound. The storm swept over him again, and he stood trembling, breathing a mute prayer. He knew what had happened, and why it had happened. The God of the Virgin and his forests had quieted the storm for a dozen breaths

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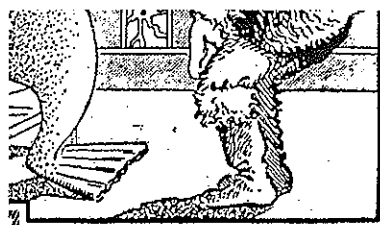
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"We will find him, Meleese," he cried, above the storm. "We will find him—and bring him back to you—Jean Pierrot—and le violon!"

He sprang out into the storm. It whistled about his ears. The snow pellets bit his flesh like a thousand needles as he lunged into it. Above it all he heard a voice following him—the voice of Meleese.

"Jean—Jean—Jean—"

"We will bring him back," he replied. "We will bring him back—Jean Pierrot and le violon!"

The night and the tumult swallowed him, and he turned his head toward the Barrens.

It was death ahead of him. Jean

he swung to the southwest. So suddenly that it startled him, there came a lull in the wind. The volleys of snow pellets staggered, dropped like spent shot and fell lifeless about him. And in that moment there came a great, throbbing leap of life into Jean Pierrot's heart. From ahead of him very near—there came to him faintly a sound that was not of the storm. It was a voice. He heard it twice, three times; and then, far in the arctic darkness behind him, there came a moaning, whistling, rushing sound. The storm swept over him again, and he stood trembling, breathing a mute prayer. He knew what had happened, and why it had happened. The God of the Virgin and his forests had quieted the storm for a dozen breaths that he might hear, ahead of him, the voice of Brant, the Englishman.

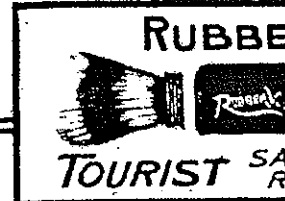
He staggered on, straining his eyes now through the snow gloom and calling as loudly as he could through his swollen lips. He was still looking ahead when he stumbled against something dark and inanimate in the lee of a dune through which he struggled knee deep. He dropped into the snow beside it, knowing that it was Brant before his blistered eyes gained strength enough to see.

"M'sieur!" he cried. "M'sieur!"

Brant did not move, and Jean drew off his mittens to feel of the man's face. Ten minutes before Brant's lips had uttered the cries he heard, and there was still life in him. He mumbled something that was lost in the storm as Jean lifted his head in his arms. The sound of the voice, faint as it was, filled him with the old, maddening fire. For an instant or two it overmastered him, and he drew back to look at the Englishman, dying in the snow. Two or three miles to the south were the forests. He could reach them and build a fire. Brant would die, and then—well, he could not allow himself to dwell for any length of time upon what would follow.

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